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SUBJECT: MALUKU: PEACE REIGNS AFTER ALLEGED BLASPHEMY SPARKS A  
DAY-LONG SECTARIAN RIOT

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This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

1. (SBU) Summary. Rebuilding is underway in the Central Maluku town of Masohi after a day-long sectarian riot broke out there after more than four years of calm. On December 9, more than 60 houses and two churches were burned and six people were injured in Masohi on Seram Island some 120 km east of the provincial capital Ambon. Nearly 300 families fled their homes as a result of violence. Local press and Congen Surabaya contacts suggest that the riot was triggered by the anti-Islamic statements of a Christian elementary school teacher the town. Police also named Asmara Wasahua, a local legislative candidate from the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) as a suspect in inciting the crowd to violence. Authorities and local community leaders prevented the conflict from spreading and Congen Surabaya contacts confirmed that the violence had ended entirely by December 10. Sources said it was too early to speculate on possible political manipulation of the riot. For now, all fingers point to the unfortunate statements of an elementary school teacher as the proximate cause. End Summary

2. (SBU) On December 9, one day after Muslims celebrated Eid ul Adha, a major religious holiday and national holiday in Indonesia, a riot broke out in Masohi in a response to rumors that elementary school teacher Welhemina Holle, had insulted Islam in comments she made while teaching a sixth grade class. She allegedly commented that Muslims look like goats chewing grass while they pray. News of the insult was especially inflammatory during a holiday that includes the sacrifice of goats, sheep and cows and distribution of the meat to the poor. Students reported their teacher's statement to their parents and news of the alleged blasphemy spread quickly through the Muslim community. The local chapter of Indonesian Muslim Council (MUI) lodged a police complaint and by 8:30 AM on December 9 some 500 Muslims had gathered to demonstrate in front of the Central Maluku Department of Education. Parents of students who had witnessed Holle's statement brought their children to the protest and demanded that Holle be dismissed.

3. (SBU) According to Mr. Abidin of Maluku Interfaith Forum told

Congen Surabaya violence started when an unidentified man provoked the protesters by striking a light pole-a common means of warning a community of danger. Protestors started throwing rocks and rioting quickly spread. Two churches, a health clinic, some 67 homes, four vans used for public transport, and a motorcycle were burned. Six people were injured, two seriously. Congen Surabaya contacts said tensions remain high in Ambon and many said that the telecommunications network was barely operational for almost six hours. Rumors continue that communications were blocked by authorities to avoid provocation by cell phone voice and SMS.

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#### Community Leaders Stop Violence From Spreading

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14. (SBU) Police were deployed immediately to the site of the riot and by the next day, December 10, Masohi had nearly returned to normal. While some markets, offices, and schools had yet to reopen, residents returned to their homes after seeking refuge at the barracks of the 731 Kabaressy Infantry Battalion. The Governor, the Pattimura Military Commander, the Maluku Police Chief, the MUI chairman, and the head of Protestant Synod all traveled to Masohi and held a public dialog with local religious and community leaders. Local leaders agreed to maintain calm after the governor urged them to learn from the past when prolonged sectarian conflict claimed thousands of lives.

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#### With Culprits Caught, Reflection and Rebuilding

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15. (SBU) Police have detained three people; Welhemina Holle, Asmara Wasahua, and Mohammad Boci Patty. On December 12, the Maluku Police Chief, Mudji Waluyo, named Welhemina and Asmara Wasahua as suspects for sparking the riot. Boci Patty is currently charged with twelve counts of arson. Holle was charged with blasphemy, while Asmara who was caught on film leading a protest that later turned into a riot, is being charged with inciting criminal behavior. Asmara Wasahua is the chairman of the Central Maluku Muslim Communication Forum and PKS' legislative candidate for the Central Maluku legislature. During a December 10 conversation about the involvement of political parties in the Masohi riot, Sufi Madjid, a member of Maluku provincial legislature from PKS denied involvement by his or any political party in the riot. Abidin of Maluku Interfaith Forum said that Welhemina Holle might be innocent of the accusations, or she might simply be ignorant of the impact of her statements on her students. Alternatively, he speculated, she might have been willfully misinterpreted and a victim of a conspiracy to start a riot.

16. (SBU) Reverend John Ruhulestin, Chairman of Maluku's Protestant Synod suggested that a collective apology to Muslims by Christians was in order if the blasphemy charges proved true. Sufi Madji told Congen Surabaya that, when linked to religious faith, any incident no matter how small could spark a riot and "cause ordinary people to do bad things." On December 17 Maluku Governor, Karel Ralahalu, estimated that government needs Rp.

1.8 billion (USD 165,000) to repair houses, churches, and public facilities damaged during the riot. Abdulah Tuasikal, the Regent of Central Maluku, said that the local government has started to repair houses and churches, hopefully in time for Christmas services. While there are indications that local politicians might yet turn the riot to political purposes, Ikhsan Tauleka of Maluku Democratization Watch told us that it is still too early to tell if the riot can be traced to the continued rivalry between Regent Abdulah Tuasikal who is a failed PKS gubernatorial candidate, and incumbent Governor Karel Ralahalu who won the Governor's race with the support of the Indonesian Party for Democratic Struggle PDI-P in July 2008.

MCCLELLAND